

# Former child slave fights human trafficking

## Khurshida Begum plans to teach law enforcement, others how to spot victims, ask the right questions

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The Olympian

January 9, 2014

A former child slave hopes to launch a training workshop this spring in Lacey to educate social service providers about human trafficking.

The program will be called ASHHO — which stands for advocate, serve, honor, humanity, organize. Lacey resident Khurshida Begum wants to provide hands-on training for those who work with survivors, including law enforcement and social service agencies. The training will include teaching people how to spot victims and ask the right questions, such as “Are you free to leave?”

Human trafficking can involve sex, prostitution and forced labor — any activity in which a person is sold. As Begum noted, victims hide in plain sight, often afraid to seek help.

Victims can be forced to sell magazine subscriptions door to door, for example, or work late nights in restaurants and massage parlors.

“My goal is to change perspectives,” Begum said. “The only way to prevent it is to talk about it.”

At age 8, Begum arrived in the U.S. with her captor — an educated, well-connected white male in his late 40s who promised a better life. He eventually took Begum and eight other family members from their native Bangladesh to Pakistan, then finally to a 64-acre farm in Oakville.

The immigrants were routinely beaten, raped, starved and threatened with death.

The turning point came in 1989, after a year in captivity, when one of Begum’s cousins committed suicide. The family members escaped the farm to a neighboring house.

They couldn’t read, write or speak English, but a Grays Harbor County sheriff’s deputy knew something was wrong. Their rescue made international headlines. The captor was arrested, but because of fake immigration documents, the family faced deportation.

Begum linked up with a foster family, but struggled with the trauma as she grew up. She eventually got her life on track. The single mother recently graduated with an associate’s degree from South Puget Sound Community College, where she served as student body president. She is now studying at The Evergreen State College.

Today, at age 34, Begum shares her story across the region and nation to raise awareness about human trafficking.

“This is a fight for humanity and for basic human rights,” Begum told the Capital City Newcomers during the social group’s luncheon Wednesday at Indian Summer Golf and Country Club. “I’m very passionate about Thurston County. I’ve got to protect where my son and my neighbors live.”

The number of sex and labor trafficking victims in the U.S. is estimated in the hundreds of thousands, according to the Polaris Project, a Washington, D.C.-based organization. The estimate includes at least 100,000 children.

Washington is among the leading states for laws against human trafficking.

Olympia resident Rose Gundersen co-founded Washington Engage, which has successfully lobbied for specific provisions in sex crimes, such as harsher penalties for pimps and traffickers. Laws were also enhanced to protect and assist victims.

“What we want to see is actual changes that trickle down from policies,” Gundersen said, noting the need to build close partnerships with police and community agencies. “The law can only do so much.”

Washington Engage plans to expand its statewide network in 2014 while maintaining the overarching goal of ending demand for trafficking. One effective avenue, Gundersen said, is to target the buyers of sex — who are typically white, blue-collar males.

One of Washington Engage’s hallmarks is the Deceptions program, which educates local students on the dangers of pimps and the coercive mind games they play. A big eye-opener is that victims come from all socioeconomic backgrounds and include U.S. citizens and foreigners.

Rosalinda Noriega, co-founder of Olympia-based Partners in Prevention Education, said victims are reluctant to talk about their ordeal. Noriega hosts an anti-trafficking task force that works to identify local resources for homeless or at-risk youth affected by this trauma. Resources include not just safe housing, but job training and therapy.

“It’s really about meeting the needs of every individual that is trafficked. They don’t all have the same needs,” Noriega said.

Awareness

President Obama designated January as National Slavery and Human Trafficking Awareness Month. In addition, Saturday is National Human Trafficking Awareness Day. Volunteers with Washington Engage will spread their message among Seahawks fans at Saturday’s playoff game in Seattle. To learn more, visit [waengage.com](http://waengage.com).

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